

Mr. Ford's Page



A NUMBER of people here and there have been discussing the Pilgrims, who come to these shores three centuries ago and began a community life which has borne their impress more or less ever since. Many persons seem to have a grudge against the Pilgrims. It is half amusing to hear the descendants of later Pilgrims of another class berate the Mayflower passenger list.

There is a very distinct tendency observable in many quarters and under many guises to change romantic administration of the Pilgrims into a critical contempt for them, not for the purpose of getting a true light on the men and women who landed at Plymouth, but for the purpose of weakening the idea which has come to us from that little company.

It is true that we owe certain traditions to the Pilgrims which we can throw off or not, as we choose. But it is a question whether the only possible substitute would not be a step down.

The Pilgrims were moralists, who saw the world in the light of a moral government, and if this conception is unwelcome to the men of today it is because it conflicts with certain degenerate tendencies. Man, even at his worst, is something of a reasoning being; and whenever he wishes to go in a direction against which the old tradition militates, his first act is consciously or unconsciously to formulate a new philosophy which sanctions what he wishes to do.

But it is probably true that when most of the so-called "blue laws" are examined in a spirit of fairness, they may be viewed as attempts to nip in the bud a number of tendencies whose lush maturity at the present day constitutes our most serious problems. As a nation we might have been more somber had we kept the spirit of the Pilgrims, but certainly we should have been sounder.

For a long time, though dead, the Pilgrims formed the conscience of the nation, and even now the bitterness with which many speak of them would indicate that they still form an uncomfortable part of the national conscience. One of the signs of a normal conscience is its power to cause discomfort.

The Pilgrims were adventurers and pioneers so far as the material world is concerned, but they were conservatives in the world of idea. They were not seeking to establish the untried and unproved, but were protesting against that which had been superimposed to the great disadvantage of the tried and proved. And so, it was a new land they sought, but not a new mode of society; they sought rather the oldest and most natural form of society, that which was governed by the community spirit, in which freedom and responsibility balanced each other.

They were only a few score folk; and the pioneers are always few in number. That is one of the compensations of the pioneer, that he is at once relieved of the crowd.

The difficulty comes when the pioneer believes himself to be a constable armed with a warrant to drag the whole world into the path he is breaking. The true pioneer does not regard himself as a constable. He breaks his path in the serene confidence that if it is a good way to the desired objective, the rest of the world will soon make it a wide, well-trodden road.

The Pilgrim sought something for himself, but it is a law of life that when one seeks good for himself he is also finding it for others, if it be a real good.

It may even be said that he sought special privileges for himself, and special privileges are not to be condemned if they be good; for it is the history of special privileges, if they be good, that they become the general privilege and then the established right, because they are good.

Every right we have today was first a "special privilege." One class gained it, and then another, until it became the publicly secured right of all.

The Pilgrims had also a religious faith, which has this advantage for pioneers, it saves them from feverish impatience. When a man believes only in himself, he is impatient to get things done in his own day, and if he fails, the hope of his life goes out in incurable disappointment. But if a man believes in the moral government of the universe, if he believes that the right is not wholly dependent on him, though his own moral manhood may depend on his loyalty to the right, then he has a secret key to the apparent slowness with which the Right assumes its reign. He does not overstep himself in his haste. He does not resort to coercion. He waits in confidence, making it his main concern that he be true at the post of duty to which destiny may have assigned him.

But what of the Pilgrims of today? Where would one go today to be a Pilgrim, the earth being so well subdued in its material sphere, at least seemingly so.

Even the Pilgrims did not escape human society; no man can do that by merely traveling, his main avenue of escape is in himself. And it was not human society from which the Pilgrims desired to escape so much as they desired to escape to a society more human.

This is a question hardly worth discussion, because the discussion is usually carried on by and for those who are not and never will be Pilgrims in any sphere whatsoever. It is surprising how few there are in any generation who have the Pilgrims spirit.

The Pilgrims were city people, to begin with, men with trades. It was not so much their crossing the ocean as their entrance upon an agricultural existence that constituted their daring. They went from the city to the land, and they went to untamed land at that.

This is a point very often overlooked. None of the orators and writers seem to think it worthy of mention. Yet when you consider the Pilgrims as they were, and then the conditions they came to, you will see that it is not a minor point.

That avenue is still open. There is more land available today than the Pilgrims could get. Yet the human pilgrimage does not turn that way. Men are enamored of what they think is their physical comfort, although as a matter of fact much of the physical comfort of today is simply the opposite thing. Men are not comfortable in their bodies under an unnatural mode of life, no matter how comfortable the appointments of a modern house may appear to be.

Men today would do many things if they were guaranteed against loss. If the government would carry us, or someone would nurse us along, and treat us tenderly, we would be willing to do a number of things. And for that reason a number of things are not done—the spirit of the pioneer is not in us. If it were, we would follow its bidding and go where it

led, and we would then find that it has secret resources which had been unsuspected before. There seems to be a reservoir of strength and illumination and courage waiting to be of service to the spirit that will venture forth in obedience to guidance. It is not luck but Providence that has provided caches of supplies along paths still invisible, but waiting to be broken by the obedient feet of the pioneer.

Young men especially, who have not as yet so committed themselves that they are speculating with the lives or rights of others, need to know this, that, as the Pilgrims found wild food and a spring of water, so the pioneer in every field finds that the Spirit has preceded him, arranging that his tests shall not be too severe.

It is of no avail to advise anyone to be a Pilgrim in any sphere. The Pilgrim is born, not made. Like the wild fowl, he hears the call of another clime and wings his way thither.

But there are many Americas in other spheres, still waiting. There are Plymouth Rocks jutting from many shores to receive adventurous feet. The surface of the world may be populated, but the secrets of the soil beneath and the secrets of the spheres above still wait silently for the sailing of new Mayflowers.

THE PILGRIMS were men who listened to their leadings and obeyed. They were not different from others, save in that. And they found that their leadings did not betray them. The voyage did not constitute their great achievement; it was their willingness to change their sphere of life for an idea. It is the Pilgrim test. That is where most of us fail. Are you willing to come down in order to go up? If you are, then you may consider yourself emancipated from the most prevalent fear that exists today. To be what we may, many of us have got to start again, and to start again we have got to go back, and that is where most of us say to our Leading—"No, I'm afraid to do that." But the Pilgrims DID IT.